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# Hamito-Semitic features in Celtic languages

**Abstract:** The aim of the paper is to present the most known Hamito-Semitic features that have been identified in Celtic languages. It has long been known that at some time of the history of Celtic languages they entered into contact with Hamito-Semitic languages, which makes them different from other Indo-European languages. Special attention in the paper will be paid to word order, consonantal mutations, lack of the verb 'to have' and of the present participle, inflected prepositions, status constructus, autonomous verb forms and the Welsh Subject Rule.

**Keywords:** Hamito-Semitic, influence, Celtic, word order

## 1. Hamito-Semitic substratum in Insular Celtic

According to Vennemann (1999), at the dawn of history the European Atlantic Littoral was explored and colonised by Mediterranean seafarers, who most likely were Palaeo-Phoenicians. Evidence of trading relations with this region can be found in the Old Testament, where reference is made with respect to trading with Tartessos<sup>1</sup> on the Atlantic coast of the Iberian Peninsula. Vennemann says that in chapter 27 of the Old Testament the prophet Ezekiel praises the Phoenician city of Tyre and talks about its trading relations with Tartessos: "Tarshish [i.e., Tartessos] was thy [i.e., Tyre's] merchant by reason of the multitude of all kind of riches; with silver, iron, tin and lead, they traded in thy fairs" (v. 12), "the ships of Tarshish did sing of thee in thy market: and thou wast replenished." Vennemann further says that prophet Ezekiel could also have mentioned copper because the copper trade from Ireland was in the hands of the Phoenicians; the Irish industrial copper mining for export has been

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<sup>1</sup> The civilization of Tartessos, an extravagantly wealthy civilization which flourished from 11th–7th century BC, predating the Phoenicians in the southern Iberian peninsula. Tartessos, ruled by a legendary king Arganthonios, dominated lucrative gold and silver trade routes with the Greeks and Phoenicians during the Bronze Age, <http://sonofherodotus.wordpress.com/2010/01/22/atlantis-found-in-southern-spain/>, (accessed: 15.03.2014).

demonstrated by archeology and it can be dated for the second millennium BC. According to Vennemann (1999: 352), there is evidence that some parts of the Atlantic littoral were Hamito-Semitic linguistically and thus it can be concluded that Insular Celtic has a Hamito-Semitic substratum: “Whereas the Insular Celtic lexicon and morphology have remained Indo-European, the syntactic transformation of Insular Celtic in the British Isles has been radical, to the point that Insular Celtic syntax, except for traces in the oldest poetic and ‘rhetorical’ Irish, no longer shows the Indo-European head-final word order and in this and in many other regards gives the impression of a non-Indo-European language. It is structurally similar to the Hamito-Semitic type represented by Berber, Egyptian, and Semitic.” As a result of this, “the Insular Celtic languages are syntactically much more similar to Arabic and Biblical Hebrew than to Latin and German” (Vennemann 1999: 352).

Below we are going to discuss the most known Hamito-Semitic features that are said to be present in Insular Celtic languages.

## 2. The VSO word order

The earliest Indo-European written languages, like Hittite, Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin, display the SOV word order. This word order afterwards changed to SVO in later phases of these languages. However, in Celtic, the VSO word order developed and is continued to the present day for example in Irish and Welsh. For example:

Irish<sup>2</sup>:

- (1) *Tá Máirtín ansin*  
‘Martin is there’
- (2) *Deir sé go bhfuil Máirtín ansin*  
‘He says (that) Martin is there’

Welsh<sup>3</sup>:

- (3) *Mae Alun yn darllen*  
‘Alun is reading’
- (4) *Rydyn ni’n darllen llyfr*  
‘We are reading a book’

Hebrew<sup>4</sup>:

Genesis 1:3

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.maths.tcd.ie/gaeilge/>, (accessed: 15.03.2014).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cs.cf.ac.uk/fun/welsh/Lesson03.html>, (accessed: 15.03.2014).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt0101.htm>, (accessed: 15.03.2014).

- (5) **וַיֹּאמֶר** אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר  
 “And God said: Let there be light.”

Genesis 1:4

- (6) **וַיֵּרָא** מֵאֲלֹהֵי אֶת-הָאוֹר כִּי-טוֹב  
 “And God saw the light, that it was good.”

In all of the examples the verb has been bold-typed.

### 3. Initial consonant mutations (lenition)

As Stenson (2008: 17) observes, the most common mutation in Irish is lenition and it affects nine consonants in a wide range of settings. When lenition happens, the affected sound is immediately followed by *h* in spelling and all changes into pronunciation involve weakening the pronounced consonant in some way and the air escapes through the mouth more freely while producing the consonant. Some of changes are presented below:

Original spelling change		Pronunciation	Examples original (lenited)
b	bh	/v/ or /w/	<i>bán</i> ( <i>bhán</i> )
c	ch	/x/	<i>cóta</i> ( <i>chóta</i> )
m	mh	/v/ or /w/	<i>máthair</i> ( <i>mháthair</i> )
p	ph	/f/	<i>póca</i> ( <i>phóca</i> )
s	sh	/h/	<i>sagart</i> ( <i>shagart</i> )
etc.			

A similar situation exists in Welsh with the difference that the affected sound is not immediately followed by *h* but it is written as it is pronounced after the lenition. This fact makes it more difficult in Welsh to arrive at the original sound, unlike in Irish.

As regards Arabic and Hebrew, consonantal lenitions are also typical in those languages.

### 4. Lack of the verb *to have*

The lack of the verb *have* in Celtic is often ascribed to Semitic substratum, as for example both Irish and Arabic do not have the verb *have* for expressing possession. Hickey (2002: 7) observes that in Arabic possession is expressed by

means of a locative construction for *have* with a preposition ‘to/for’ or ‘with.’ For example:

Irish:

- (6) *ma ‘andi kúrsi*  
Lit.: not with-me chair  
‘I don’t have a chair.’

Arabic:

- (7) *andek sayyaára?*  
Lit.: with-you car?  
‘Do you have a car?’

Hickey further says that “the verb *have* in Indo-European, inasmuch as one is dealing with a lexical verb in later languages, is generally derived from something meaning ‘hold, sieze, take.’ Older methods of expressing possession are with a form of the verb *be* and a locative or directional preposition indicating the possessor. This is the case in Greek and Latin with *moi esti* and *mihi est* respectively and is continued in Celtic languages with phrases meaning *is sth. at someone.*” For example in Irish:

Irish:

- (8) *Tá leabhar nua agam*  
Lit.: Is book new at me  
‘I have a new book.’

Hickey (2002: 7) says that “the upshot of these considerations is that there can be no question of the Celtic situation being an innovation. [...] What one should stress here is that both Irish and Arabic make ample use of special relations to render figurative meanings and in this respect the ‘look-and-feel’ of both languages is similar.” For example, if we consider the means for expressing ‘owe’ in Arabic and Irish, a striking similarity between the two languages will be evident:

Arabic:

- (9) *‘ilii 9índhum thalaáth danaaniir*<sup>5</sup>  
Lit.: to-me with-them three dinars  
‘They owe me three dinars.’

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<sup>5</sup> Because I am not acquainted with the Arabic script well enough, I provide the transliterated versions of the Arabic examples used by the authors mentioned in the text.

Irish:

(10) *Tá trí punt agam orthu*

Lit.: is three pounds at-me on-them

‘They owe me three pounds.’

## 5. Inflected prepositions

In Irish, Welsh, Breton, and other Celtic languages quite many prepositions combine with the common pronouns and, as a result, out of two words a single word arises. These are called prepositional pronouns. For example, in Irish when the preposition *ar* (on) combines with the personal pronouns, the following forms are obtained:

*orm* – ‘on me’ from *ag* + *mé*

*ort* – ‘on you’ (sg.) from *ag* + *tú*

*air* – ‘on him’ from *ag* + *sé*

*uirthi* – ‘on her’ from *ag* + *sí*

*orainn* – ‘on us’ from *ag* + *muid*

*oraibh* – ‘on you’ (pl.) from *ag* + *sibh*

*orthu* – ‘on them’ from *ag* + *siad*

In Hebrew, the situation is quite the same. When the preposition לע /’el/ (on) combines with the personal pronouns, we obtain the following paradigm:

אלי – on me from על + אני/אני (m./f.)

אליך – on you (m.) from על + אתה

אליך – on you (f.) from על + את

אליו – on him from על + הוא

אליה – on her from על + היא

אלינו – on us from על + אנחנו

אליכם – on you (m. pl.) from על + אתם

אליכן – on you (f. pl.) from על + אתן

אליהם – on them (m. pl.) from על + הם/הם

אליהן – on them (f. pl.) from על + הן

Similarly, in Arabic the preposition ‘*alā* (on) inflects as ‘*alayya* (on me), ‘*alayka* (on you[f]), ‘*alayhi* (on him) etc.<sup>6</sup> To give another example from Irish, when the preposition *le* (with) combines with the personal pronouns, the following forms are obtained:

<sup>6</sup> <http://inflected-preposition.co.tv/>, (accessed: 15.03.2014).

*liom* with me  
*leat* with you  
*leis* with him  
*léi* with her  
*linn* with us  
*libh* with yous  
*leo* with them

In Hebrew, the preposition ל /le/ means ‘to, towards’ and if the personal pronouns combine with it, the following forms are obtained:

לי – with me  
 לך – with you (m.)  
 לך – with you (f.)  
 לו – with him  
 לה – with her  
 לנו – with us  
 לכם – with you (m. pl.)  
 לכן – with you (f. pl.)  
 להם – with them (m. pl.)  
 להן – with them (f. pl.)

As regards the second example, the similarity of the form of the Irish *le* and of the Hebrew ל /le/ is probably not a coincidence and, undoubtedly, it should be ascribed to a mutual influence.

## 6. Status constructus

Using the words of Hickey (2002: 7), status constructus refers to the situation where there are two nouns in a pair and only the second one of the pair (the one in the genitive) is marked for definiteness although the first one is definite. For example in Arabic:

- (11) *Sayya:ratu al-mudi:r*  
 Lit.: car-NOM the director-GENITIVE  
 ‘The director’s car’

Hickey says that there is an exact formal parallel of this structure in Irish. For example:

- (12) *Gluaisteán an mhúiteoir*  
 Lit.: car-NOM the teacher-GENITIVE  
 ‘The teacher’s car’

## 7. Lack of the present participle

Pokorny (1959: 155; in Vennemann 1999: 354) observes that “Insular Celtic does not possess a present participle (even though its form has been preserved with a different function). [...] As in Egyptian and Berber, its function is expressed by the verbal noun.” Below we present a few examples from Modern Irish and Modern Welsh:

Irish:

- (13) *Tá tú ag obair*  
 ‘You are working.’  
*Tá sé ag caint*  
 ‘She is talking.’

Welsh:

- (14) *Mae hi’n darllen*  
 ‘She is reading.’  
*Maen nhw’n mynd*  
 ‘They go.’

Pokorny further says that “the Insular Celtic system of tenses and aspects, especially the use of the so-called progressive forms as an expression of the aspect by means of the verb *to be* + *preposition* + *verbal noun*, certainly is not Indo-European but is found in Basque and Egyptian.” First we will present examples from Egyptian. Allen (2010: 179) says that in Egyptian the combination of a preposition with an infinitive, which in fact is a sort of a verbal noun, can, among others, function as an adverbial predicate. This kind of predicate is usually referred to by Egyptologists as “the pseudoverbal construction.” It is called “verbal” because it involves a verb form (the infinitive), and it is called “pseudo” because it is syntactically a nonverbal predicate (adverbial), although part of the predicate is a real verb form (the infinitive). We can present two examples from Allen (2010: 180):

Preposition *hr* ‘upon’ plus infinitive *jtt*

- (15) *nb wr hr jtt* (Peas. B1, 123–124)  
 ‘A great lord is taking possession.’



Preposition *hr* ‘upon’ plus infinitive *rdjt*

(16) *jw sr(j)w hr rdjt n.k jw.k hr jtt* (Peas. B1 322–133)

‘The officials are giving to you and you are taking.’

Allen (2010: 179) says that the combination of *hr* (there are of course other pronouns) with an infinitive as a pseudoverbal predicate most often expresses the imperfect and it usually corresponds to the “progressive” forms of English verbs in the “progressive” tenses. Therefore, like in English, it usually indicates an action in progress either at the moment of speaking or at the time of another action. As regards Basque, according to Trask (1997), it has a very prominent verb-form called the gerund, which plays a central role in the syntax of the modern language, but its form is not everywhere the same. Trask says that “as a general rule, the gerund in the modern language does what gerunds usually do: it converts an entire verb phrase or sentence into a noun phrase, which can then occupy any position in which an NP is normally possible; the gerund itself takes the usual case-marking for its role” (1997: 244). Moreover, Trask says<sup>7</sup> that in the present day, the gerund always takes the article *-a*. However, it was not always so, because the imperfective participle is constructed by adding the locative feature *-n* directly to the gerund, without the article. Therefore, modern Basque forms an imperfective participle *heltzen* ‘arriving’ from *heldu* ‘arrive,’ as well as a locative form *heltzean* ‘on arriving’ from the gerund *heltzea*. Originally, Trask says, *heltzen da* must have been *\*heltze-n da* ‘he is at arriving.’ According to Haase (1994), the system of Basque tense and aspect shows the co-existence of two conjugation types which allow for different oppositions: the conjugation of analytically (periphrastically) construed verbs and the conjugation of synthetically conjugated verbs. As regards the analytical construction, it consists of a main verb in a non-finite form and a tense-aspect auxiliary. In the example below the main verb is a verbal noun in the inessive case, whereas the tense-aspect auxiliary is the present tense of the transitive auxiliary *ukan* ‘to have’:

(17) *Egi-te-n dut*

do-NOMINATIVE-INESSIVE, PRS.3S<1S

‘I do it.’

By combining the auxiliary in the present tense with the nominalized main verb, that is, with the verbal noun in the inessive case, one can get the normal present tense. The *to be* + *preposition* + *verbal noun* pattern can also be found in Portuguese. For example:

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.buber.net/Basque/Euskara/Larry/note\\_21.html](http://www.buber.net/Basque/Euskara/Larry/note_21.html), (accessed: 15.03.2014).

- (18) *Eu estou **a** falar português agora*  
 ‘I am speaking Portuguese now.’

In this example, the preposition has been marked in bold. However, this structure is only used in the Portuguese from Portugal. In Brazilian Portuguese the structure *to be* + *present participle* is used instead. For example:

- (19) *Estou falando português agora*  
 ‘I am speaking Portuguese now.’

The Brazilian Portuguese pattern is similar to that of English and also Spanish.

## 8. Autonomous verb form

The phenomenon of autonomous verb forms concerns agentless passives. Below are examples from Hickey (2002: 8) for Classical Arabic and Irish:

Classical Arabic:

- (20) *inkásar al-baab*  
 Lit.: broke the door  
 ‘The door was broken.’

Irish:

- (21) *briseadh an doras*  
 Lit.: broke the door  
 ‘The door was broken.’

Hickey (2002: 8) says that “the typological perspective helps in assessing the possible contact source of this structure” as parallels between languages become more credible where given phenomena are cross-linguistically rare.

## 9. The Welsh Subject Rule

What is meant by “the Welsh Rule” is a syntactic feature that is present in Welsh. Following Klemola (2000: 337; in Vennemann 1999: 357) it consists in that “3rd pers. pl. forms are only used when the corresponding pronoun *nhw* ‘they’ is explicitly stated. In all other cases where the subject is 3rd pers. pl., the 3rd pers. sing. form must be used.” Klemola provides the following example from King (1993):

- (22) *Maen nhw'n dysgu Cymraeg*  
are-PL-VERB  
'They are learning Welsh.'
- (23) *Mae Kev a Gina yn dysgu Cymraeg*  
is-SG-VERB  
'Kev and Gina are learning Welsh.'
- (24) *Gân nhw ailwneud y gwaith 'ma yfory*  
can-PL-VERB  
'They can redo this work tomorrow.'
- (25) *Geith y myfyrwyr ailwneud y gwaith 'ma yfory*  
can-SG-VERB  
'The students can redo this work tomorrow.'

Klemola (2000: 337; in Vennemann 1999: 357) says that agreement systems of this type appear to be extremely rare. Apart from Celtic, they can also be found in Hebrew and Arabic. Below is an example from Jenni (1981: §6.3.1.2; in Vennemann 1999: 358) for Hebrew:

Exodus 34: 30

- (26) וַיֵּרְא אֶהָרֹן וְכָל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת מֹשֶׁה  
'And Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses.'

Exodus 24:10

- (27) וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
'And they saw the God of Izrael.'

Jenni (1981: § 6.3.1.2; in Vennemann 1999: 358) says that in Hebrew "normally the verb agrees with its subject in gender and number. But a verb preceding several subjects which it governs in a parallel manner may occur in the singular." Vennemann (1999) suggests that the Celtic subject rule is a substratum feature which was developed in Insular Celtic on the prehistoric Semitic substratum of the British Isles. It is a non-Indo-European feature and is unique in the Indo-European world. Therefore its origin in language contact is a priori likely. Moreover, Vennemann says that "since Semitic languages, members of the language family assumed to have been in contact with Celtic in the Isles on independent grounds, do have analogs of these strange and rare agreement rules, one does not have to look any further" (1999: 358).

## 10. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I will use the words of Koch (2006: 890) who says that "the Insular Celtic languages (Brythonic and Goidelic), from their oldest

full attestation in the earlier Middle Ages, differ strikingly from the rest of the earlier attested Indo-European languages in syntactic and morphosyntactic structure, with over 20 major differences, going far beyond the languages' verb-subject-object word order profile. In most of these respects, Insular Celtic agrees structurally with an unrelated and geographically remote language group in North Africa and the Middle East: the subcluster of Afro-Asiatic [earlier: Semito-Hamitic] comprising Semitic (including Arabic and Hebrew), ancient Egyptian, and Berber. Celticists have been aware of these similarities since 1900, and several of them [...] have advocated some form of Celtic/Hamito-Semitic prehistoric contact by way of explanation, notably a pre-Celtic substratum of north African provenance in the British Isles. Most Celticists either ignore the issue, dismiss the resemblances as coincidence, or focus on deriving certain of the features from pre-existing Indo-European prototypes." Moreover, he says that "given the great time depth of human occupation in Ireland (Ériu), Britain, and the rest of western Europe, a substratum language preceding Celtic and related to attested languages of north Africa and the Middle East would be one obvious possibility. Such an explanation by no means contradicts an Indo-European provenance for some of the anomalous Insular Celtic features, but complements it."

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